

SIMPLIFYING FAITH LECTURE SERIES

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8 The Sacrament of Repentance and Confession

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.

The sacrament of repentance and confession is one of the seven sacraments of the church. Although being rooted in the Old Testament, it became a rite that the apostles, their successors, and the priests of the New Testament performed. It is no longer restricted to the priests of the Old Testament.

The Correlation Between a Baptism of Repentance and Confession:

The correlation between confession and repentance is clear throughout the New Testament. It is evident in the ministry of Saint John the Baptist, in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the ministry our fathers the apostles after the ascension of the Lord Jesus to heaven.

Just as the Lord Christ established the sacrament of the Eucharist (that is the sacrament of Holy Communion), He likewise established the seven sacraments of the church, including the sacrament of Baptism, and the sacrament of Confession.

Concerning Saint John the Baptist, we read the following in the gospel of Saint Mark, “*John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a **baptism of repentance for the remission of sins**. Then **all** the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were **all** baptized by him in the Jordan River, **confessing their sins**.” (Mk 1:4-5). So John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. However, it was God the Father Who commissioned Saint John before the Lord Jesus Christ, since it is written in the gospel, “*Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight’.*” (Mk 1:1-3).*

The phrase, “*I send My messenger before Your face*”, expresses the manner in which the Father addresses the Son. The words demonstrate God’s plan to send a person to prepare the way before Christ (see also Lk 3, Jn 1:29-34).

Here, we return to the essence of our main topic. Baptism of repentance for the remission of sins is not separated from confession, but from the beginning, they were connected (see Mk 1:4-5). In other words, people were ‘baptized confessing their sins’; meaning they practiced repentance and confession along with baptism, through Saint John the priest, who was the son of Zacharias the priest.

Similarly, Saint Matthew in his gospel writes, “*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*” (Mt 3:1-2). Then in verse six, he adds, “...and were **baptized** by him in the Jordan, **confessing their sins.**” (Mt 3:6).

Confession in the Ministry of the Apostles:

The same link between baptism and confession applied in the service of our fathers the apostles when the multitude who believed in Christ came to them to be baptized, as mentioned in the Book of Acts. What is of importance, is that at their coming to the apostles for baptism, the people’s utterance was not only, ‘We believe’. However, it is stated that, “...many who had believed came **confessing and telling their deeds.**” (Acts 19:18).

The same course of events that took place with John the Baptist, continued at the time of the apostles. John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and it is written that people were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. Consequently, on the day of Pentecost after the coming of the Holy Spirit, “...many who had believed came **confessing and telling their deeds**” to the apostles (Acts 19:18).

Therefore, confession occurred at the beginning of the ministry of Saint John the Baptist, as an introduction to the manifestation of the Savior and His call for repentance: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*” (Mt 3:2). What transpired in the service of Saint John also occurred in the service of our fathers the apostles, after the fulfillment of salvation.

Confess Your Trespasses to One Another (James 5, 14-16):

Saint James the Apostle wrote in his epistle, “*Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.*” (Jam 5:14). This refers to the sacrament of the Unction of the Sick. Saint James then continues with, “*And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*” (Jam 5:15). Saint James then also mentions, “***Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.***” (Jam 5:16). He wrote this, lest any person understand that only prayer over the sick and the anointing of oil is required for the forgiveness of sins.

When the apostle said, “*And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven*”, he continued immediately saying, “*Confess*”. Therefore, the sin of the sick will not be forgiven, without confession.

Furthermore, so that no person may believe it is adequate to confess his sins in secret, the apostle continued, “*Confess your trespasses to one another*”. The Protestants interpret this verse saying, ‘We can confess to anyone’ because it is written “Confess

your trespasses to one another”. However, this is not what Saint James intended. He said, “*Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the **presbyters** of the church*”.

In the Arabic version of the Holy Bible, and in some English translations, the term ‘presbyters’ in this verse (Jam 5:14) is translated as ‘elders’. The same Greek word was translated in the Book of Acts as ‘presbyters’. For example, “*From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the presbyters of the church.*” (Acts 20:17). Different people have their own purposes for translating the word in varying ways, but this is not our subject now. However, the conclusion is that, ‘elders’ means ‘presbyters’.

The apostle wrote, “*...pray for one another.*” Does this mean that the sick will pray for the presbyters, or the presbyters for the sick? It is clearly understood that the presbyters pray over the sick, not the sick over the presbyters. The Biblical text says, “*...pray for one another, that you may be healed*” and “*..call for the presbyters of the church, and let them pray over him.*” ‘One another’ here does not mean an interchange between the two parties; but ‘one’ refers to the presbyter, while ‘another’ refers to the sick.

The same applies to the phrase, “*Confess your trespasses to one another*”. It is understood that the presbyters will never come to the sick to confess their sins. Rather the sick will confess to the presbyters, because Saint James added, “*...and the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*” (Jam 5:15). Hence, the phrase, “*...he will be forgiven*”, applies to the sick. From the above-mentioned passage we can identify what is known as ‘confession to another’.

Is Confession to God Sufficient?

Protestants argue, ‘Why do we not confess to God secretly, or in our personal prayers?’ In response, we refer to two Biblical texts. The first says, “*...many who had believed came **confessing** and telling their deeds.*” (Acts 19:18). The second says, “*Confess your trespasses to one another.*” (Jam 5:16). In this instance, ‘one’ refers to the sick, while ‘another’ refers to the presbyters of the church.

Saint John the Apostle said in his first epistle, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” (1 Jn 1:9). By the phrase, “*If we confess our sins*”, he certainly does not mean confession directly to God without the presence of a priest.

It has never been mentioned in any biblical verse that confession should be practiced secretly. However, several verses mention the practice of confession before a priest. Even in the Old Testament, one had to confess his sins. Moreover, confession was sometimes practiced by a multitude, if the sin was common or general.

The Book of Proverbs:

In the Book of Proverbs, we find the following words of advice, “*He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.*” (Prov 28:13). In the verse, it was not mentioned that confession was practiced secretly or inside the heart, instead it is written, “...*whoever confesses and forsakes them* (the sins) *will have mercy.*”

If confession is made secretly, and not verbally before a priest, then the sins are retained, and “*He who covers his sins will not prosper*”. However, the Bible says, “...*whoever confesses and forsakes them*”; meaning whoever practices verbal confession, mentioning the sin and confessing it, will have mercy. Thus, it is not enough to forsake one’s sins, but one should forsake his sins and confess them.

Confession in the Days of the Son of Sirach:

In the Book of the Wisdom of the Son of Sirach, we read, “*Be not ashamed to confess thy sins.*” (Sir 4:31). Some Protestants consider the Book of the Wisdom of the Son of Sirach as one of the apocryphal (second canonical) books, but despite this, no one denies that the book carries useful direction within it. Even Protestants do not deny this fact.

The Son of Sirach wrote, “*Be not ashamed to confess thy sins.*” This statement gives an insight into the circumstances of the days of the Son of Sirach, during which time his book was written. Whether it is considered as apocryphal or canonical, in all cases what the Son of Sirach wrote, are the concepts that were observed during his lifetime.

Many difficulties and shortcomings arise as a result of secret confession within one’s heart. Yet this does not mean that one should not question himself. Of course it is important for a person to examine his actions, and feel within his heart that he has sinned. Saint Paul the Apostle wrote, “*But let a man examine himself.*” (1 Cor 11:28). Everyone preaches the importance of self-questioning and self-examination. The prodigal son, “...*came to himself...*” (Lk 15:17). So self-examination is something that no one refuses, but everyone demands.

The point of divergence between us the Protestants occurs after self-examination. Should verbal confession be before the face of a priest, or secretly between one person and God alone? Sometimes, Protestants say that confession need only be made to any of the brethren. In other words, if confession is necessary, one can confess to anybody else. This teaching is anti-Biblical, and will be further clarified.

The Sinful Woman:

The sinful woman, “...*knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.*” (Lk 7:37-38). The Lord Jesus Christ told her that, “...*her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much...*” (Lk 7:47). He then said to her, “*Your sins are forgiven.*” (Lk 7:48).

The Lord Jesus Christ according to His divinity, is omnipresent. The Protestants do not differ from us in this concept. Even when the Lord Jesus was on earth, He occupied the heavens, the earth, and all places, by the glory of His divinity. He told Nicodemus, *“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”* (Jn 3:13). When He was speaking, the Lord Jesus gave Himself the title, ‘Son of Man’. He wanted Nicodemus to understand that the Son of Man who was speaking to him, was at the same time present in heaven, according to His divinity. The divinity of Jesus Christ occupies the heavens and the earth.

The sinful woman knew that Christ the Lord occupied the entire universe according to His divinity. Thus if she desired, she could have confessed in her private room, in the Protestant way. In this case, she could have said, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me’, and would have believed that her sin was forgiven. However, what happened, is that she entered in the presence of those who attended the Pharisee’s invitation for the Lord, wept, and *“...washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head.”* It was a public confession which indicated that she desired forgiveness. In verse 37, it is written, *“...a woman in the city who was a sinner.”* This tells us that all citizens in the city, were aware of the woman’s sinfulness. Even Simon the Pharisee, *“...spoke to himself, saying, This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.”* (Lk 7:39).

The Stewards of the Mysteries of God:

It might be said that the sinful woman confessed at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that this is different to confessing before any priest. We answer saying that Jesus Christ forgave sin while He was on earth, but after His ascension to the heavens, He appointed stewards to forgive sins in His place.

Saint Paul the Apostle said, *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.”* (1 Cor 4:1-2).

Saint Paul was a steward of the mysteries or sacraments. Before the Lord Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, He elected stewards or representatives for Himself on earth. A steward can perform specific duties given to him by the owner. For example, if a person would like to sell a piece of land but does not have time to go to the department of real estate to negotiate, he authorizes someone to represent him. This representative, agent, or steward, will carry out the necessary steps to sell the land on behalf of the owner. The land is not the steward’s to sell and he does not sell it by his own authority. Rather, he completes what is required, due to the authority given to him by the owner. This authority is powerful and effective.

The Lord said in the Epistle of Saint Paul to Titus, *“For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God.”* (Tit 1:7). Here he speaks of the bishop as a steward of God. Paul the Apostle, Peter, and the twelve disciples were not the only stewards of God,

but their successors became stewards also. Saint Paul was not one of the twelve disciples, nor one of the seventy; on the contrary, he was a persecutor of the church. However, Christ called him and the church laid hands on him, so he obtained his discipleship to become a steward of God.

It is written about the apostles that, *“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 13:2-4). How were they sent by the Holy Spirit? They were sent by the Holy spirit through the church who laid hands upon them.

Later, Saint Paul the Apostle told his disciple Titus, *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint presbyters in every city as I commanded you.”* (Tit 1:5). Hence, Saint Paul appointed Titus as a bishop, and reminded him to appoint presbyters in every city as he instructed. This is the pastoral work of the church.

Thus Saint Paul the Apostle in his First Epistle to the Corinthians said, *“And God has appointed these in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing...”* (1Cor 12:28). So God has appointed people in the church. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Saint Paul also wrote, *“...**He Himself** gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.”* (Eph 4:11).

The Ministry of Reconciliation:

The Protestants object to the idea of the presence of a mediator between man and God saying, *“**For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.**”* (1Tim 2:5). But no person except the Lord Jesus Christ has the ability to forgive sin through the shedding of his own blood, to be a mediator between the Father and human beings for the forgiveness of sin, and to pay the cost so that we may receive forgiveness. Who can claim that he can atone the sin of man through self-sacrifice except the Lord Jesus Christ? Who can save and wash with His blood except the Lord Jesus Christ? We all agree on this.

However, the Lord Christ has appointed stewards. These stewards do not have the same authority of Christ to forgive through their own blood, but they grant forgiveness through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are only stewards; they do not give from what is theirs, but by the power of the Holy Spirit they take what is Christ's and give it those whom they serve. This is why Saint Paul wrote, *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”* (1 Cor 4:1).

Therefore, we carry the word of reconciliation, because He, *“...has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”* (2 Cor 5:19). In other words, Christ committed to us to reconcile men with God. *“...We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.”* (2 Cor 5:20).

But what does He “...*has committed to us the word of reconciliation*” mean? It means that as priests, when we pronounce the phrase, ‘You are absolved’, forgiveness is not granted by our individual power, but through the merits of the blood of Christ. This word of reconciliation was committed to us, the stewards, and not to all people.

The Faithful and Wise Steward:

When the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Saint Luke spoke of being vigilant, watchful, and prepared for the coming of the Groom on the last day, He said, “...*and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*” (Lk 12:36-40).

In the above passage, the Lord addressed all those who believed in Him. Then Saint Peter asked, “*Lord, do You speak this parable only to us, or to all people?*” (Lk 12:41). By this, Saint Peter was asking, ‘Are these words directed to the apostles, or to everyone?’ The Lord answered, “*Who then is that **faithful and wise steward.***” (Lk 12:42). From this point onwards, the Lord started to address the apostles.

The previous discourse was directed towards all people, because Jesus said, “*Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching.*” He also said, “...*and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master...*” However, when the Lord was asked if this speech was for the apostles only or for everyone, He started to speak about the steward, and said, “*Who then is that **faithful and wise steward whom his master will make ruler over his household.***” (Lk 12:42). This steward, having been made ruler over others, was distinguished from them.

He was not distinguished in a manner which implied that he was superior to others, or preferred by God; but he was distinguished because he possessed a different level of responsibility. A person entrusted with a responsibility must be answerable concerning how well the responsibility is carried out; and because of this risk, some avoid responsibility. On the other hand, the one who tires, will receive a reward. If a steward is found faithful, he will be rewarded for his faithfulness and will receive great compensation for his efforts. But the one shunning responsibility due to feelings of incapability, or out of fear of being later questioned, will not receive the reward of a faithful steward.

Still, it must be noted that the danger lies in accepting responsibility whilst being unfaithful. The account of such a person will be settled in a harsh way. When God appoints a steward, He does not show preference to one person over another, rather He

chooses the steward according to the person's willingness to accept the responsibility out of his love for others.

Do You Love Me? Feed My Lambs:

The Lord Jesus Christ said to Saint Peter, "*Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these? He said to Him, Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.*" He said to him, *Feed My lambs.*" (Jn 21:15). The Lord was saying, 'If you love me, feed my lambs; tend my sheep'. "*He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...*" (Eph 4:11). Therefore, pasturing should be motivated by love.

A Great Responsibility:

About responsibility, there is a warning in Christ's words when He says, "*Who then is that faithful and wise steward whom his master will make ruler over his household (note here, that he should not only be faithful, but wise) to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.*" (Lk 12:42-46).

From this we see that it was better for the servant not to have become a steward. Saint Paul the Apostle told his disciple Timothy, "*If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.*" (1Tim 3:1). In other words, it is good to desire the position of a bishop, but as a bishop a person is required to be faithful. If you are going to carry out the responsibility, are you capable or not? If not, remember the words, He "*...will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.*" Many flee from the honor of the episcopacy; knowing its seriousness and the gravity of the responsibility before God.

At the ordination of a bishop, he is handed a pastoral staff and told, "God has entrusted you with the souls of His flock, and from your hands their blood is demanded". One might say, 'I cannot fulfill this appointment' or 'Why should the blood of others be demanded of me?' This is why it is also written, "*And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.*" (Heb 5:4). The divine call should be sensed, and one should respond to it, motivated by love. As the Lord said to Saint Peter the Apostle, "*Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me...Tend My sheep...Feed My sheep.*" (Jn 21: 16-17).

To Whom Do We Confess:

Confession should not take place simply before any lay person, because the Lord has appointed stewards or priests to carry out the responsibility. When the Lord Jesus Christ said to Saint Peter, “...*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*” (Mt 16:19), He did not speak lightly, but in all seriousness.

This was not only said to Saint Peter, but to all of the disciples. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew we read, “*Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” (Mt 18:18). Some Protestants may interpret this to mean that the apostles had the authority to forbid or permit certain types of foods, but this interpretation is inaccurate.

As mentioned in the Gospel of Saint John, during the Lord Jesus Christ’s manifestation to His disciples after the resurrection, He told them, “*Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*” (Jn 20, 21). We expect that upon hearing these words, the disciples may have felt afraid or overwhelmed due to the seriousness of the mission at hand.

“*And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*” (Jn 20:22-23). Therefore, when the Lord said, “...*whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*” (Mt 18:18), He was not speaking of primarily of food or any other action. It must be noted however, that this verse can applied to the guidelines concerning food.

For example, in the Book of Acts we read, “*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things, that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled.*” (Acts 15:28-29). Even in such matters whatever the apostles bound was binding, and whatever they loosed was loosed. However, this is not what the Lord spoke of in the Gospels of Matthew and John, for when He gave them the authority of the Holy Spirit, He said, “*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” (Jn 20:22-23). The authority given to the apostles to bind and loose did not concern food only, but more importantly, the forgiveness of sin. This did not happen without ritual or a formal proceeding, but, “*He breathed on them...*”

He Breathed on Them:

The Lord breathed on His disciples and said, “*Receive the Holy Spirit...*” (Jn 20:22). On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the entire church which was gathered in the upper room. But when the Lord breathed on the disciples, He did so on the day of His resurrection, forty days prior to His ascension to heaven, and fifty days prior to Pentecost. When Christ appeared to the disciples for the first time after His resurrection, it occurred exactly on the day of the resurrection, while they were gathered together, He said, “*Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*” (Jn 20:21).

Because redemption had been fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ, things became serious. He appointed His disciples and sent them; but this time **the ministry was for a new purpose it took a new scope**, which was the forgiveness of sin. This did not take place without proceedings, but through the breathing of the Holy Spirit on them.

The Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost, but this was different. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon every believer including men and women; It came upon all those who were in the upper room. This is known as the sacrament of Chrismation, which we call the Myron. In the upper room on the day of the resurrection however, the Lord gave the apostles **the gift of priesthood**, with the power and authority of the Holy Spirit, in a distinct fashion. It varied greatly from the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The gift of priesthood which was granted to the apostles enabled them to become stewards of the mysteries of God, including the authority to forgive sins.

If You Retain the Sins of Any, They Are Retained:

As we have mentioned, a bishop is a steward of God, and he can grant absolution with the authority of the Holy Spirit. As the Bible says, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* (Jn 20:22-23). In the Gospel of Saint John it is also written, *“Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, Peace be with you. When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* (Jn 20:19-23).

If a bishop or priest does not hear the confession of sins, how can he ascertain whether or not a person is repentant? And how can he forgive some sins and retain others if he has no knowledge of the sin itself?

If the Bible only went as far as to say, ‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them’, then a person could request absolution from a priest, receive forgiveness, and the matter would conclude at this point. However, the Lord completed the verse saying, *“...if you retain the sins of any they are retained.”* Therefore, forgiveness requires the priest’s hearing of the confession, as well as his assessment of whether the person is repentant or not. For this reason, forgiveness is not granted to everyone.

Narratives from Real Life:

At this point, we recall some stories that highlight the importance of listening to confessions. We hear the story of one of the priests who was a very kind man. This priest owned an old-fashioned gold watch which had been given to him as a gift. He

would always place the watch in his side pocket, and fasten it to the button of his robe with a golden chain. One particular day, a young man went to him at the church for confession. The young man knelt closely before him, and in humility, the old-aged priest also bowed. The youth confessed saying, 'I have stolen; absolve me'. So the father being a kindly old man, prayed the absolution for the youth. After the young man departed from the church, the priest searched for his gold watch but could not find it; so He went to the bishop and related all that had happened. The bishop reprimanded him saying, 'When the young man confessed that he had stolen, you should have asked him if he had returned what he had stolen before absolving him'.

When the Lord Christ entered the house of Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, "...stood and said to the Lord, Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." (Lk 19:8). For this reason, the bishop told the priest that he should have at least asked the man to return the stolen item before praying the absolution.

This reinforces the importance of wisdom in a steward. It is written, "*Who then is the faithful and wise steward whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?*" (Lk 12:42). (We shall later explain what is meant by 'food' in this verse). The story also demonstrates that repentance and confession are related, and that the confession father should be wise. He should not only grant absolution, but lead a person to true repentance.

The priest must accurately evaluate a person's repentance, and determine its genuineness. If an item was stolen, he must ask if it was restored to its owner. He must also ask if the person has rectified, to the best of his ability, the damage incurred. If the confessor cursed another person, the priest must ensure that there was an apology and reconciliation. All in all, the priest must evaluate the confession, and ensure that the repentance is true. Only then can absolution be granted, and the confessor can hear the words of the Lord Christ to the paralytic when He said, "*Son, your sins are forgiven you.*" (Mk 2:5). As a steward of God, the priest says, 'God absolve you'. It is not he who forgives, but through the authority of the Holy Spirit granted to him; and through the merits of the blood of the Lord Christ, the priest is able to grant forgiveness.

A Second Narrative:

Once a man went to see a bishop whom I know personally. The bishop did not know who this man was, because he came from a different country. The man confessed to the bishop saying, 'I committed murder, and I want you to absolve me from this sin'. A court case was instigated and investigations were underway, but what the man really sought was absolution from a spiritual perspective. He confessed as though he had repented, but the evaluation of his repentance was an extremely difficult task. Here we will focus on a few key points in this story.

The bishop questioned the man, asking him what his motive was for murder. He responded saying that he killed the other person during a fight. When the bishop asked him why, he said that he and the other man had been involved in disputes over specific

matters. So the bishop sensed hatred in the heart of this man towards the person whom he had murdered. The bishop started speaking to the man about one spiritual aspect concerning his case, but he was not able to address other aspects because of the way in which the case concluded. The bishop asked the man how he would react if the murdered man were to return to life. The man said quickly, 'I shall kill him again'. For this reason, the bishop said, 'I cannot grant you absolution, as you show no repentance', and he ordered the man to leave.

If the man who committed murder, returned to the bishop in repentance, the bishop would have forgiven him; but in the first instance, the elements of repentance were not evident. The confessor failed to demonstrate his repentance during his answer of the first question. And so the man was not forgiven, and the bishop since has never seen the man.

In this story, the murderer wanted to have confession in a county where the bishop did not know him. In all cases, the details of the sacrament of confession must never be revealed, but the problem in this case was that this person did not repent. Therefore, the bishop retained his sin and did not grant him forgiveness: "*If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*" (Jn 20, 23).

Some might ask why the bishop did not give the man a punishment for repentance. In this case, any form of punishment would have been unprofitable, and thus the bishop could only exercise dismissal.

The Wrath of God:

On the last day, the Lord Christ, "...will also say to those on the left hand, *Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*" (Mt 25:41). In the Gospel of Saint Luke, we read, "*I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.*" (Lk 13:27).

A bishop should be tender-hearted, kind, and full of love towards a repentant person who regrets his sin. However, he should also demonstrate, "...*the wrath of God...revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.*" (Rom 1:18). Jesus Christ Himself said to the Jews, "*I tell you, unless you repent you will all likewise perish.*" (Lk 13:3,5). He also told them, "*Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins...*" (Jn 8:24). Saint John the Baptist told the Jews, "*And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*" (Lk 3:9).

A priest or a bishop should exhort people and call them to repentance. Therefore, Saint Paul the apostle told his disciple Timothy, "***Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.***" (1 Tim 5:20).

Ananias and Sapphira:

When Ananias and Sapphira withheld a portion of the proceeds from the possessions which they had sold, Saint Peter asked Sapphira, *“Tell me whether you sold the land for so much? She said, Yes, for so much. Then Peter said, How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?”* (Acts 5:8-9) *“Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”* (Acts 5:4).

Ananias then fell at the feet of Saint Peter and died. When his wife also lied, Saint Peter said, *“Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.”* (Acts 5:9). Sapphira then died, *“So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.”* (Acts 5:11). Why did fear fall upon all of the people? Because lying to the Holy Spirit is a sin which should not be taken lightly.

If a bishop is a steward of God, then a priest is a steward of the bishop. Formally, many priests printed the title, ‘A Steward of the Coptic Orthodox Law in the County’ alongside their name on their personal cards. A priest is a steward of the law because he is the steward of the bishop. In turn, the bishop is an arch-priest, as well as the steward of God (see Tit 1:7). While the High Priest is the Lord Jesus Christ (see Heb 5:10).

A Priest :

In a specific dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the Monastery of Mar Ephrem the Syrian (Maarat Sydnaya in Syria), discussions were held on the Sacrament of Priesthood. The talks took place under the invitation of His Holiness the Antiochene Patriarch Mar Ignatius Zaka I. During the meeting, the Protestant leaders claimed that the expression ‘priest’ was never applied to the apostles in the New Testament. They said that the words ‘presbyter’ and ‘bishop’ are mentioned, but not ‘priest’. They also believe that there is no priest in the New Testament in heaven and on earth, other than Jesus Christ.

Everything previously mentioned concerning priestly authority, demonstrates that priesthood exists. For example, when Jesus Christ gave His body and blood to the disciples on the eve of his crucifixion saying, *“This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”* (Lk 22:19), He gave them the authority to perform the sacrament of the Eucharist (Holy Communion). Therefore Jesus Christ was called, *“High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”* (Heb 5:10). The order of Melchizedek is the offer of bread and wine. So Jesus Christ is considered the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, because priests offer bread and wine in the New Testament.

The Protestants wished to address this issue differently. We believe that Jesus Christ is High Priest, that there are priests offering according to the order of Melchizedek, and that the practice of forgiveness is performed by the bishops and presbyters as stewards of the sacraments of God. This was insufficient for them, rather they insisted that the word ‘priest’ is not mentioned in the New Testament.

Consequently, we referred to the Greek New Testament, since it was written originally in Greek. In the Epistle to the Romans Saint Paul says, “*that I might be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*” (Rom 15:16). In the Greek version, we read the word $\text{\iota\epsilon\rho\upsilon\rho\gamma\omicron\upsilon\nu\tau\alpha}$ from the verb $\text{\iota\epsilon\rho\upsilon\rho\gamma\epsilon\omega}$. The verb means ‘to officiate as a priest’, because it consists of the word $\text{\epsilon\rho\gamma\omicron\nu}$, meaning ‘work’ or ‘job’; and the word ($\text{\iota\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma,\alpha,\omicron\nu}$) which means ‘sacred rites, holy, divine’. The word $\text{\iota\epsilon\rho\epsilon\upsilon\varsigma}$, meaning “a priest, one who performs sacrificial rites”¹ is derived from ($\text{\iota\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma,\alpha,\omicron\nu}$). This is different from $\text{\pi\rho\epsilon\varsigma\beta\upsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\jmath}$.

In Greek, the word $\text{\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\kappa\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma}$ means ‘a bishop’, and the word $\text{\iota\epsilon\rho\epsilon\upsilon\varsigma}$, means ‘a priest’. It does not have another meaning. Upon hearing this, the Protestants were unable to respond due to their astonishment. Unfortunately, those who can refute their claims are not always present when the Protestants preach to people; and so those who are simple in faith believe their words. It would be better if they did not conceal the truth, but speak truthfully.

Again we say that in the Epistle to the Romans, Saint Paul says, “*that I might be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*” (Rom 15:16). Here he says, ‘my offering of the Gentiles’ because his ministry was for the gentiles. Saint Paul also wrote, “*...they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles.*” (Gal 2:9). Thus he was ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that the offering of the gentiles might be acceptable. This is similar to saying that a certain bishop is the bishop of a specific diocese. The bishop would say that he is the minister of Christ for that city or diocese; and he would ask that is acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the Pope of Alexandria might say that he, ‘ministers for Christ to Alexandria’. By saying this, he sets the boundaries of the area for his ministry.

For the offering of the people to be acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, a priest must be present. If there is no priest, the offering will never be accepted. How can one offer a donation, or how can he raise a divine sacrifice in the liturgy if he is not a priest?

One might comment saying, how can an ordinary person be a high priest if Christ the Lord is considered the high priest (see Heb 5:10)? It is written that Christ is called a **priest**: “*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*” (Heb 5:6). Therefore a high priest is a priest, just as the head of soldiers is a soldier, or the head of doctors is a doctor.

Give Them Their Portion of Food in Due Season:

Christ the Lord said, “*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life.*” (Jn 6:27). And He said, “*I am the bread of life...*” (Jn

¹ Wesley J.Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Hendrikson Publishers, fifth printing 1996.

6:48) And also, *"For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* (Jn 6:33).

Therefore, the most important thing that a steward of God can offer to people, is the body and blood of the Son of God. Christ also said, *"...give them their portion of food in due season..."*; meaning that a priest should hasten to give the body and blood of the Lord to people before they die. Jesus Christ said, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you."* (Jn 6:53). How can a steward be faithful and wise if he does not reconcile people to God, by leaving them without repentance or communion? Thus it is written that He, *"...has given us the ministry of reconciliation."* (2 Cor 5:18).

A bishop must lead people to repentance so that they are able to approach the holy table to receive the bread of life, of which we say in the liturgy, *"Given for us for salvation, remission of sins and eternal life to those who partake it"*. If a bishop neglects a person and the person dies before receiving communion, the bishop will be questioned. He will be asked, *'How did you leave this person?'* or *'Why did you not call him to repentance and for the table of life?'* The Lord said, *"...he who feeds on Me will live because of Me."* (Jn 6:57).

This responsibility should not hinder the bishop's obligation towards the poor, and his duty to respond to their materialistic needs. Jesus Christ said, *"...for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."* (Mt 25:35-40). Therefore, a bishop should also look after the financial needs of the poor, and He should pasture his flock in all areas.

We must also ask, what is benefit of providing earthly bread without also giving people the Bread of Life? After performing the miracle of feeding the multitude, the Lord Jesus Christ rebuked the people saying, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled."* (Jn 6:26). The people did not seek the Lord out of their hunger for the Bread of Life; but instead, they labored for the food which perishes. Jesus Christ rebuked them because they were seeking earthly food rather than the Bread of Life.

Confession in the Old Testament :

In the Old Testament, when a person sinned, he was required to present a sacrifice, put his hand on its head, and confess his sins before a priest. In turn, the priest would slay the sacrifice, spread its blood, and atone the sin. An innocent soul was to be killed in the place of a sinful soul.

To assist us in understanding the concept of forsaking sin publicly, and confessing sin during the offering of the sacrifice, a range of biblical verses follows below.

It is written that an Israelite sinner, *"...shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill it as a sin offering at the place where they kill the burnt offering... So the priest shall make atonement for his sin that he has committed, and it shall be*

*forgiven him... And it shall be, when he is guilty in any of these matters, that **he shall confess that he has sinned** in that thing; and he shall bring his trespass offering to the Lord for his sin which he has committed... a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin.” (Lev 4:33-35, 5:5-6). In other words, a person was required to lay his hands on the head of the sin offering and confess his sin, so that the priest could make atonement for him.*

*“Then the Lord spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, ‘When a man or woman commits any sin that men commit in unfaithfulness against the Lord, and that person is guilty, then he shall **confess the sin** which he has committed. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full, plus one-fifth of it, and give it to the one he has wronged.” (Num 5:5-7). This highlights the necessity of confession of the sin.*

*It is written, “Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, **confess over it** all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable man. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.” (Lev 16:21-22).*

In the laws and commandments of the Old Testament, the offering of the sacrifice was connected to both the confession, and the act of placing the hand on the head of the offering. This meant that the sin would pass from the sinful person to the sacrifice. Moreover, the arch-priest was required to confess all of the sins of the children of Israel. One goat was slain and the other was sent away into the wilderness. Why did they have two goats? Because one symbolizes the death of Christ as a sacrifice, while the other symbolizes His resurrection. They could not slay a goat, and expect it come back to life because this could never happen.

Thus it is written, “*And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.*” (1 Jn 2:1). Since Christ arose from the dead and ascended to heaven, He has continually advocated with the Father on our behalf. In the Old Testament, the symbol of the resurrection would not have been fulfilled if a goat was slain. This is because the life that symbolized the living Lord, Who arose from the dead, advocating our case before the Father, would not have been present.

Concerning the goat, some people provide incorrect interpretations which are against biblical doctrine. We responded to these people in a newspaper in Egypt, and so they were silenced.

Baptism of the Lamb:

It is clear that practicing confession existed in the Old Testament, in the Aaronal priesthood. It was also practiced in the period of transition, during the days of Saint John the Baptist, who is called the prophet of the two testaments. John the Baptist was of the seed of Aaron, he baptized our Lord Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, and he

witnessed Holy Spirit descending on Jesus Christ in the form of a dove. He also said, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” (Jn 1:29).

We recognize that John the Baptist did not practice priesthood as it was practiced in the Old Testament. He did not stand in the temple and offer sacrifices, although he was a priest and the son of the priest Zacharias. Like Christ the Lord, John the Baptist started his ministry at the age of thirty (he is six months older than Jesus Christ). He practiced priesthood differently to his predecessors, by introducing baptism; baptism of repentance. Why did he practice his priesthood with baptism? Because he was preparing the way for “...*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*”. The Lamb was the true sacrifice, and so the sacrifices and offerings of the temple should have been forgotten.

The ministry of John the Baptist was to preach a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, in order to transfer the people’s focus towards the Lamb; the real sacrifice. Jesus Christ was baptized in the River Jordan, thus linking the Lamb and baptism. This is when the voice of the Father came from heaven, and when the Holy Spirit came upon the Son to declare Him as the Anointed One of God; the awaited Messiah.

By entering the Jordan River, the Lord established the sacrament of the holy baptism. Thus the Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) was manifested. We believe in a baptism that is in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ told His disciples, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” (Mt 28:19).

The Lamb of God established the sacrament of baptism to show us that with it, we can receive forgiveness through His redeeming death on the cross. Thus, forgiveness of sin in the ministry of Saint John the Baptist was a very wonderful thing because it was through baptism.

It is known that the forgiveness of sin in the Old Testament was through sacrifices and sin offerings in the temple, so why in the New Testament did it change to forgiveness through baptism? Simply because the sin offerings were a symbol of the baptism that Christ the Lord would establish. He instituted baptism so that it would become the means through which believers are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.

The baptism of repentance of John the Baptist was symbolic, and this is why the Lord said to His disciples, “*John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*” (Acts 11:16). Moreover, He said to Nicodemus, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” (Jn 3:3).

Confession was Prevalent in all Stages Concerning Forgiveness:

Confession was always present in all stages pertaining to forgiveness. It was present during the stage of animal offerings, during the stage of baptism of repentance in the

Jordan River, in the New Testament after the establishment of the Church, and when the Holy Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost.

One of the incidents that occurred in the Old Testament, concerned Achan the son of Carmi in the Book of Joshua. He took of the accursed, and when his actions were discovered, Joshua told him, “*My son, I beg you, give glory to **the Lord God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.***” (Jos 7:19). So Achan had to confess what he had done.

Do Not Be Called Rabbi...Do Not Be Called Teachers:

A Protestant may claim that since Jesus Christ said, “*Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.*” (Mt 23:9-10), that no person should be called father. The Protestants endeavor to arouse suspicion in the sound beliefs and doctrines of the Orthodox Church, by saying that the church should not use the term ‘father’, or ‘master’ for bishops.

With regard to this subject, “*...Jesus spoke to **the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do...they love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi’. But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.***” (Mt 23:1-12).

Parts of this speech, including the words, “*...whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do...*”, were directed to the multitude in general. However, in the first verse it is written, “*Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples.*” Therefore, a section of the speech was directed to the multitude, while another was directed to the disciples only. This is why the Lord said to the disciples, “*...do not be called ‘Rabbi’...do not be called teachers...*” He was prohibiting them from asking the people to call them ‘Rabbi’ like the Pharisees, “*...who love greetings in the Market and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi’.*” He also told them, “*...he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*”

The Lord was teaching his disciples to resist pride, and for this reason, He told them never to ask people to call them rabbi or master. If a person called the disciples master, this was permitted; but they were not permitted to ask someone to call them master. In other words, respect from people was to be earned, and not imposed on others by force. Christ did not say, ‘do not call anyone Rabbi’, but rather he said, “*Do not be called ‘Rabbi’...* ” and “*...do not be called teachers...*” By this, Jesus Christ meant that the disciples should not consider people impolite if they did not call them

master or teacher; He also did not want the disciples to ask people to call them by these titles. The Pharisees on the other hand, liked being called master and teacher.

Does this then contradict what is written in the Bible, “*And God has appointed these in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers*” (1 Cor 12:28)? Here Saint Paul mentioned that God has appointed teachers. If God has appointed them teachers, why then does He tell them, “...*do not be called teachers...*”? God gives specific people the gift to become teachers, but with this gift, they are not permitted to ask people to call them master. God gives gifts, as it is written, “*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them, if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*” (Rom 12:6-8). The Holy Spirit bestows many different gifts; and one of these, is the gift of teaching.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle writes, “*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers.*” (Eph 4:11). God Himself gave some to be teachers, so they should not oppose those who call them teacher, since God Himself gave them this title.

The Protestants have developed an entire doctrine based on the one verse; but really when the Lord spoke to his disciples in Matthew 23, He was speaking of humility. A bishop, for example, should not tell his disciple, ‘Go and inform such and such a person that the master would like to tell you something.’ This is unsuitable. He should refer to himself as weak, miserable, and lowly, but not as ‘master’. In the letters of Saint Abraam of Fayoum, he concludes with, “As many thanks as possible, from our lowliness.” I have one of these letters of Saint Abraam bearing his signature; it was addressed to a man called Youssef Bek.

When a person speaks of himself, he should not say he is the master. Rather, he should feel in his heart that he does not deserve this title. However, if someone were to call him master, father, or grandfather this would not be wrong. In Upper-Egypt, people call the grandfather ‘master’, because the grandfather has a respected place in the family as the father of fathers. Yet when the grandfather deals with others, he should feel that they are his brothers.

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III always gives the following advice: “Be a brother among your children, and a son among your brothers.” The Lord said, “*Do not call anyone on earth your father*”. Unlike the verse in which the Lord said, “...*do not be called ‘Rabbi’...do not be called teachers...*”, in this verse He said, “...*do not call...*”. The meaning is different here, because the Lord was speaking to our fathers the apostles, and His words were directed specifically at them. When a person is speaking to a group of people, it is not uncommon for him to direct and redirect his words to specific people, or groups, within the group.

Do Not Call Anyone On Earth Your Father:

When referring to the disciples, this statement is correct because the disciples have no father; their father is Christ. The Patriarchs for instance, are fathers of fathers, and they also have no father. The Greek word πατριάρχης which means ‘patriarch’ consists of two words – patria, meaning ‘lineage’, ‘descent’ or ‘race’, and αρχη meaning ‘head’. So the patriarch is the head of the fathers, no father is superior to him because he is the father of fathers. Here the Lord wanted to tell the disciples, “Do not call anyone father” because you are fathers. Thus, there are varying degrees of fatherhood.

The disciples freely used the expression, ‘son’ when addressing their spiritual sons. Saint Paul the Apostle said to his disciple Timothy, “*To Timothy, a true son in the faith...*” (1 Tim 1:2). He also said, “*This charge I commit to you, son Timothy.*” (1Tim 1:18). He spoke to him as a father would speak to a son calling him, “*...son Timothy...*” This is because he was an apostle, a father of fathers, while Timothy was a young bishop. Saint Paul also addressed Titus in the same manner saying, “*To Titus, a true son in our common faith...*” (Tit 1:4). So, he spoke to both Timothy and Titus calling each of them ‘son’. Furthermore, Saint Paul spoke to the Corinthians telling them that he was their father.

The Lord Jesus Christ did not say, ‘Do not be called father’, but He did say, “*...do not be called ‘Rabbi’... do not be called teachers...*” By this He meant that He did not want the disciples to seek the glory associated with being teachers. But concerning fatherhood, He did not say, ‘Do not be called father’, because fatherhood is an admirable and superior role. When directing his words at the Corinthians, Saint Paul the Apostle said, “*For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.*” (1 Cor 4:15). He was telling them that they may have had ten thousand instructors but not ten thousand fathers; he was their father who had begotten them through Christ’s gospel. He similarly says to the Galatians, “*My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you.*” (Gal 4:19). In other words, Saint Paul labored painfully; serving them until he could clearly see the image of Christ in them. This pain was likened to that of a woman in childbirth.

Saint John the Beloved Apostle frequently and repeatedly said, ‘My children’. He said, “*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin...*” (1 Jn 2:1). To the people he said, “*I write to you, little children...*” (1 Jn 2:12, 18, 28, 3:7, 5:21). Then he said, “*My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*” (1 Jn 3:18). Saint John used the title ‘my children’ at least seven times at the beginning of the epistle when addressing all people in general, or when making a general speech directed to everyone. It differed from advising children to be obedient to their parents, or distinguishing parents from children; he was addressing all people.

If we applied the words, “*Do not call anyone on earth your father...*” literally, would the Protestants stop calling their fathers at home ‘father’? Let us ask Protestants all over the world, if one of them did not ever call his own father ‘**father**’. If they call their **biological** fathers ‘father’, then **what about their spiritual fathers**? Therefore,

in this verse, the Lord was only addressing the apostles when He said, “*Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.*”

The Lord Jesus Christ Was Called Father:

Jesus Christ Himself was called father. The Bible says, “*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, **Everlasting Father**, Prince of Peace.*” (Isa 9:6). We clearly comprehend the fatherhood of the Lord Christ towards for us; and the fatherhood of a priest, stems from this fatherhood of Christ.

Words of Advise:

I would like to advise priests who practice the sacrament of confession, to ensure that the sacrament is performed in the church. In the Old Testament, the confessor would go to the temple, lay his hand on the head of the offering, and then make the offering inside the temple. Similarly, a person should confess in the church, because the church is the place for the forgiveness of sins.

Confession should take place in a public area, but in privacy so that others cannot overhear. It should be in a public place, but in a way that does not cause the sacrament to lose its reverence or its correct ecclesiastical conditions.

Finally, Confession should be to a wise spiritual father; a true advisor and guide, because the holy fathers said, “Examine your guide, lest you seek advice from a sick person instead of a physician.” So before choosing, or becoming attached to, a specific father of confession, one should examine him carefully.

We ask for the prayers of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, that God may always grant us the spirit of repentance, in order to confess our sins and gain forgiveness from the Lord.

Glory be to God forever, Amen.